You Talk Like A White Boy

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ABSTRACT: The question that I asked is: “Is it possible to speak a certain color?” Growing up I always hear people associate the color of someone’s skin to the way that they speak. I discuss Black English, and proper English and give examples of differences. In my conclusion, I talk about how nothing in life should be determined off of somebody’s race alone. Racism is what is holding this great nation back.

KEYWORDS: *Ebonics, proper English, racism,*

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Is it possible to speak a certain color? Growing up, I went to a predominantly black school that had seventy-five kids in each grade level. Of the kids in my grade, there were three white kids. I am mixed with Caucasian American, and African American. I spent majority of my childhood growing up with my mother who is white. My mother speaks “properly” and I started to speak like her. All of the kids at school made fun of me because I “talk like a white boy”. I never understood why they made fun of me for that, or why it was bad to speak properly.

When I was growing up, I never saw skin color. I saw good and bad, and smart and dumb. Smart and dumb was not how you talked, or how you looked; smart was getting all A’s on your report card and dumb was failing. There were some smart people that talked like dumb people, and there were dumb people that talked liked smart people. Some spoke in slang, others spoke properly. Majority of people that I went to school with classified people by how they spoke. I know what society thinks a black person should talk like, and I know what society thinks a white person should talk like. I think it is ridiculous to classify people on race in the first place, let alone how they speak. Everybody wants to compare race to everything that every person does. What they like to eat, how they cook, the way they dress, the way they act, and the way that they talk.

Talking is learned. The way you speak is unique because it’s yours. You own the way that you talk, and nobody can ever take that away from you. People definitely have an influence on the way you talk, but at the end of the day, your going to speak how you want to. For example, when a black person is educated, and works in a professional field, majority of the time he is going to speak what society believes is the proper way of speaking. If that person has a child, odds are, growing up in an educated household with a father who is a professional in a certain field, the child is going to speak proper as well. If that child goes to an all black school, he could end up speaking in Ebonics all of the time. It all depends on how he wants to speak.

What is speaking proper? In HubPages (2011) article “How to Speak Properly and Master the Art of Conversation” they stated that, “Speaking properly is all about developing great oratory and conversational skills that boost your personal and professional image.” (par. 1) So what this is saying is that speaking properly is speaking like a professional. It does not say that speaking properly is speaking a certain color. Proper speech does not belong to a certain race. It belongs to those who want to sound professional and intelligent. Don’t get me wrong, there are professionals that do not speak properly, and do not sound intelligent. You can have one without the other. Just majority of the professionals speak properly.

There is such a thing called Black English. In James Baldwin’s article, “If

Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” (1979) he stated that “Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: Neither could speak the other's language. If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world's history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did. Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun, of his master, Congo Square, and the Bible--or in other words, and under these conditions, the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed.” (par. 1) This language was created so that the black people could figure out a way to communicate with one another, and to sound the same. Their backs were against the wall already with slavery, so they wanted to unify as one. That started with the language that they spoke.

With this came the term Ebonics. John R. Rickford explained Ebonics in his article “What is Ebonics (African American English)?” (2012) He stated that, “Ebonics simply means ‘black speech’ (a blend of the words ebony ‘black’ and phonics ‘sounds’). The term was created in 1973 by a group of black scholars who disliked the negative connotations of terms like 'Nonstandard Negro English' that had been coined in the 1960s when the first modern large-scale linguistic studies of African American speech-communities began.” (par 5) The scholars made up their own name for the ‘accent’ that the black people had because of the stigmas that were being put on them for the way that they spoke. “However, the term Ebonics never caught on among linguists, much less among the general public. That all changed with the 'Ebonics' controversy of December 1996 when the Oakland (CA) School Board recognized it as the 'primary' language of its majority African American students and resolved to take it into account in teaching them standard or academic English.” (par. 5). The school board decided to teach Ebonics in the classroom as a form of English. They were the first to do so, and one of the only.

What does Ebonics sound like? John R. Rickford explained it again from “What is Ebonics (African American English)?” (2012) Ebonics pronunciation includes features like the omission of the final consonant in words like 'past' (pas' ) and 'hand' (han'), the pronunciation of the th in 'bath' as t (bat) or f (baf), and the pronunciation of the vowel in words like 'my' and 'ride' as a long ah (mah, rahd). Some of these occur in vernacular white English, too, especially in the South, but in general they occur more frequently in Ebonics. Some Ebonics pronunciations are more unique, for instance, dropping b, d, or g at the beginning of auxiliary verbs like 'don't' and 'gonna', yielding Ah 'on know for "I don't know" and ama do it for "I'm going to do it." (par. 9) When I think of how society portrays Black English, this is definitely what I think of. This is how some black people that I know speak. Its looked down upon by many people though because they think that they are lazy for not pronouncing the word all the way. Rickford said that many people see it as a lack of education or sophistication as a legacy of slavery. I can see why people would think this way. Just say the word completely, and how it is supposed to be said, right? But its not that easy for most people. They are so used to talking the way that they do that it would be way to hard to break their habits.

Where did Ebonics come from? John R. Rickford had the answer again from “What is Ebonics (African American English)?” (2012) “On this point, linguists are quite divided. Some emphasize its English origins, pointing to the fact that most of the vocabulary of Ebonics is from English and that much of its pronunciation (e.g. pronouncing final th as f) and grammar (e.g. double negatives, "I don't want none") could have come from the nonstandard dialects of English indentured servants and other workers with whom African slaves interacted.” (par. 11) Wherever it came from, it has caused quite an eruption, and stirred up some serious problems. This whole paper is on the problems of “Speaking white”. When black people don’t use Ebonics, they are made fun of and called names that they shouldn’t be called.

In the article “Your Black; So Why Do You Talk White?” written by Christopher Norris in 2013, he talked about how he speaks proper English and gets harassed for it, and stated “To suggest that all black people talk like ignorant hood rats and that all white people pronounce every word with conviction, clarity and authority, is severely misguided and ill-informed. Furthermore, when blacks, moreover society as a whole, insinuate that somehow other blacks with couth are trying to be like their white counterparts, is simply not true.” (par. 1) This is very true. Just because some people don’t speak the same way that others do, does not mean that they are not proud of who they are. To me, the only thing it means is that they are trying to be a better person. I am not insinuating that speaking Ebonics is bad, what I am insinuating is that speaking proper English is good. Why is it good? Because people like it, and it sounds good. You sound like you know what you’re talking about, more intelligent, and more genuine.

Jamelle Bouie stated in “Talking White” (2014) “There is no such thing as ‘talking white,’ … it’s actually called ‘speaking fluently,’ speaking your language correctly. I don’t know why we’ve gotten to a place where as a culture—as a race—if you sound as though you have more than a fifth-grade education, it’s a bad thing.” (par 2) Once again, this goes for both sides, more so for black people to make fun of other black people for speaking the way that they do. Bouie also stated that “proper” English is associated with white people in the black society. Many teens despair one another for “talking white”. Why is it so bad to sound white?

The black society believes that talking properly is talking like a white person. They believe that talking like a white person is bad because what the white people did to black people fifty plus years ago. The black people are caught up on segregation and slavery still. I was not around when this was happening. My parents weren’t around when this was happening. Black people get so offended when black people speak “proper”. They feel like the black person who speaks white is a traitor and wants to be white. That is not the case at all. The only thing black people who speak proper want is to not be looked at for how they talk, but to be looked at for their intelligence.

In the article “The Problem With Sounding White” written by Leila Day (2016), she talked with a radio host Joshua Johnson whose job literally depends on the way that he talks. He stated “This is my voice,” Johnson says. “People ask me that a lot. They’re like, ‘Do your radio voice. ’ I say, ‘This is it.’ My goal on the radio is to sound like me. I don’t want to sound like the host who is e-nun-ci-at-ing the headlines to you.” (par. 9) Later in the Leila Day’s article Johnson talked about how when a listener found out that he was black she was shocked and sent in an e-mail saying “I would have bet money that you were white.” (par. 11) He didn’t get offended, but he wasn’t happy. This man gets paid to speak on the radio because of how he talks, and how intelligent he is. Why does it matter what the color of his skin is?

In conclusion, some people may see color when they speak, but I don’t. I don’t believe in stereotypes, or discriminating against one for the way that they talk. I think classifying people by a certain race because of the way that they talk is racist. Everything revolves around race in this country and that’s what is holding this great nation back. Its not one race that does it more than another race. All races do it. All think that classifying people by race is ok. I’m not saying that all people in all races are racist, because that is not the case at all. What I am saying is that all races have those people that think that their race is superior to another race and that acting like another race is frowned upon so badly that you will get made fun of for doing so, and maybe even hurt. Every race is beautiful in its own way. Yeah, black people came up with Ebonics, that’s fine. Don’t be mad at people when they don’t use it. White people can’t be mad at other white people who do use Ebonics. I just wish that we would look at real problems, not the way that people speak. But at the end of the day, if I said that somebody talks like a white boy, that person would know exactly what I was saying, vice versa. So is it possible to speak a certain color? Most would agree, some would disagree.

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